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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000417

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, NEA/PI  
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT AND SHAPIRO  
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/08/2019

TAGS: [EAID](#) [OPRC](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [KCRS](#) [KISL](#)

KMPI, KSPR, KWMN, XF, LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: CIVIL SOCIETY TELLS DAS SPIRNAK MEPI  
FUNDING BADLY NEEDED

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) In several meetings on March 30-31 with visiting NEA DAS Madelyn Spirnak and the Ambassador, civil society leaders thanked the USG for its support of civil society reform initiatives, mainly through Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funding. The groups also briefed DAS Spirnak on a number of projects currently being supported by MEPI. This support includes advocacy training, financing independent media outlets, assisting moderate Shi'a political figures in order to counter extremist Shi'a movements and youth empowerment initiatives. DAS Spirnak and the Ambassador also visited a number of Public Diplomacy and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) projects, including a school refurbishment project, American Corners' facility, and an ACCESS Microscholarship cluster school. End Summary.

CIVIL SOCIETY STEPS  
IN WHERE GOL IS ABSENT

2. (SBU) In a March 30 meeting with visiting NEA DAS Madelyn Spirnak and the Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff, National Democratic Institute (NDI) Country Director Joe Hall and representatives of local NGO partners provided a briefing on the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)-funded, "Citizen Lebanon" project. Citizen Lebanon, a partnership between NDI and seven Lebanese civic partners, aims to empower Lebanese citizens to become part of the decision-making process at the local level, with potential for regional and national initiatives to follow. Through intensive preparation of sixty community facilitators, NDI and its partners have empowered community activists in thirty targeted municipalities throughout Lebanon to hold regular discussion and debate groups.

3. (SBU) Hall said Citizen Lebanon partners have held over 400 discussion groups with close to 5,200 citizens. The discussion groups focus mainly on issues of citizenship, the rule of law, elections, local governance, and the role of the media. Hall noted that many Lebanese are not aware of their rights or obligations as citizens, as the GOL has been

essentially absent in many areas of the country for decades. He added that the Citizen Lebanon project fills a gap that is badly needed, as facilitators are educating Lebanese citizens on their rights, in addition to training local citizens how to advocate for changes in their community.

¶4. (SBU) One local partner explained that in Hizballah-dominated Bekaa, where she works, women in discussion groups say that in the past they voted in elections based on how their husbands told them to vote. Now the women are beginning to ask why they should vote for a particular candidate and question whether or not the candidate's political platform will benefit them. While most of the participants are young and enthusiastic, the majority of the decision makers in the local communities are elderly men, Hall noted. Hall said the Citizen Lebanon partners are in discussions about future programming related to the upcoming June 7 parliamentary elections, including facilitating public debates between parliamentary candidates in their home districts.

MEPI FUNDING SUPPORTS  
INDEPENDENT MEDIA  
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¶5. (SBU) Founder of Statistics Lebanon, Rabieh Haber, told DAS Spirnak that MEPI funding has been essential in supporting Lebanon's only independent on-line news source, Lebanonfiles.com. Almost all media outlets in Lebanon are partisan, and Lebanonfiles provides those looking for unbiased news an outlet they can rely on, according to Haber.

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Lebanonfiles published more than 226 non-partisan interviews with local politicians (from both the opposition and majority parties), and 136 interviews with NGO and civil society leaders.

¶6. (SBU) Lebanonfiles is currently ranked number 3, out of 41, among all Lebanese on-line news sites, and is ranked number 20 among all national and international news sites visited from Lebanon, Haber said. He noted that most Lebanese newspapers and radio stations, and a number of international media sources, reference Lebanonfiles' reporting in their newspapers and broadcasts. Haber highlighted a number of sections on the Lebanonfiles web-site, including a 2009 elections documents page, political interviews section, and a civil society page. Over a two-year period, Lebanonfiles has received over 40 million hits, Haber added.

MODERATE SHI'A FIGURES  
SUPPORTED BY MEPI  
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¶7. (C) DAS Spirnak also met with representatives involved in a MEPI supported project, managed by the International Republican Institute (IRI), but implemented by a local organization, Hayyabina. (Note: Hayyabina is one of NDI's seven local partners, working in the Bekaa, under the Citizen Lebanon project, and also implements Embassy Beirut's Public Diplomacy program - Teaching Women English. End Note.) Hayyabina aims to help non-aligned and independent Lebanese Shi'a figures build a common platform regarding political reform and have a real voice in their community, to find an alternative to Hizballah and Amal, the traditional, allied Shia political parties. Hayyabina Founder, Lokman Slim, Project Manager, Inga Shei, moderate Shi'a cleric, Sheikh Mohammed Ali al-Hajj, and progressive Shi'a political activist Malek Mrowa briefed DAS Spirnak on IRI's support for Hayyabina's Leadership Academy for moderate Shi'a Sheikhs. Mrowa noted that the leadership academy is located in the heart of the Hizballah-controlled Dahiyeh (southern suburbs of Beirut), and that Hizballah has not been able to discredit the academy as it has discredited other political projects seeking to challenge its dominance over the Shi'a community.

¶18. (C) Shei said Hayyabina is providing space for moderate, non-aligned clerics, to disseminate their teachings and hold bimonthly workshops on networking. Hayyabina, in coordination with IRI, accepted 30 Sheikhs to participate in the six-month program. In the future, Shei said the group wants to open a women's leadership academy and a dormitory for students from remote areas who want to attend the leadership school. Hayyabina also plans to take participants on religious pilgrimages outside Lebanon, especially to Iraq.

YOUTH SHADOW GOVERNMENT  
PROMOTES POLITICAL REFORM  
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¶19. (SBU) DAS Spirnak also met with the "Youth Shadow Government," a project that provides thirty Lebanese youth aged 20 to 25, including students from public and private universities and technical institutes, with training and practical opportunities to experience the Lebanese democratic political process in action. Acting as a "Shadow Government," participants monitor political developments occurring at the national level and act as a watchdog over the actual government's performance. The "Shadow Ministers" work entails monitoring each ministry, explaining to their university colleagues and the public at large the government's performance, and debating alternatives to the decisions that were made by the government.

¶10. (SBU) The Shadow Minister of Energy said she was working on making light bulbs in Lebanon more energy efficient (and banning non-efficient bulbs from import, an action we

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cautioned against) and on possibly finding an international donor who could fund the opening of a waste water facility in the district of Koura. The Shadow Minister of Health is working on a project to create a Lebanese equivalent to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The Shadow Ministers have gotten a lot of publicity, according to Project Manager Ayad Wakim, who said Ministers appeared on numerous TV shows highlighting the work of the Shadow Government, and have also met with President Michel Sleiman.

¶11. (SBU) On the margins of a reception hosted by the Ambassador, DAS Spirnak also met with many alumni of MEPI-funded programs and the Lebanon MEPI Alumni Network Steering Committee. Members of that committee stressed the positive effects MEPI experiences had on their lives and explained their strong desire to "give back" through projects linking some of the networks that had been developed by MEPI, e.g., women's legal network -- to work with the women's business network and women in technology to help women set up their own small businesses. They thanked MEPI for the continued support of the MEPI Alumni Network, which they viewed as contributing greatly to MEPI's success in Lebanon.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND USAID  
PROGRAMS HIGHLIGHT USG ASSISTANCE  
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¶12. (SBU) DAS Spirnak and the Ambassador visited a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) project in the Chouf on Tuesday, March 31. They visited a USAID-funded Lebanon Education Assistance for Development (LEAD) School in Baakline Secondary School. The LEAD program features physical repair works to schools, provision of school equipment, science and computer laboratories, implementation of awareness programs on various subjects and provision of extracurricular activities.

¶13. (SBU) In the Chouf, DAS Spirnak and the Ambassador also visited several PD programs. They spoke to a group of high school students about the U.S. at the Baakline American

Corner and visited an English ACCESS Microscholarship cluster school in Muktara (Chouf). ACCESS provides English language and civic education instruction to a wide audience of underserved high school students. The impact of these modest scholarships significantly affects the recipients and increases their understanding of the U.S. The ACCESS program, provides participants with English language skills, instills important democratic principles and provides the basis for them to participate in other USG-funded programs, e.g. those funded by MEPI.

¶14. (SBU) Finally, DAS Spirnak met with representatives from the NGO Teach For Lebanon (TFL), a program modeled after Teach for America, to discuss education reform initiatives. TFL staff said they are moving ahead with the creation of the program, though they have run into financing difficulties, as it is hard for non-partisan groups in Lebanon to fundraise. The group seeks to recruit up to 40 volunteers to teach in 12 to 13 schools throughout Lebanon in poor and underdeveloped regions for a two-year period. After completing the program, volunteers will be offered a number of incentives including full scholarships to the American University of Beirut (AUB) for their master degree studies and guaranteed job interviews with fortune 500 companies.

¶15. (U) Acting DAS Spirnak has cleared this cable.  
SISON